“Sailing” to “Byzantium”: A Voyage into Symbolism

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Abstract

While William Butler Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium” is often described as “less complex” than “Byzantium,” the differences between the two poems appear to have been rarely considered on levels other than meaning or referents. This essay aims at unearthing a basic textual difference which may account for the above judgement with the help of a framework rooted in structuralism and influenced by the theories of Alexander A. Potebnja. The analyses of the two poems allow the conclusion that while “Byzantium” can be regarded as a symbolic text, “Sailing to Byzantium” approximates that mode of writing without being entirely controlled by it.

Introduction

To one scanning a selection of the overwhelming amount of scholarly work prompted specifically by the two Byzantium poems of William Butler Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium,” it might appear that, faced with two texts of ambiguous interpretation, analyses often turn to sources outside the poems in order to underpin a reading or a paraphrase. Such sources might include biographemes from Yeats’s life, other writings of Yeats—in an attempt to regard Yeats’s quasi-mythology as a largely unified system—, or historical accounts of Byzantium and Ireland. T. R. Henn, in his 1965 book, went as far as suggesting that “Byzantium” deals with the poet’s “real or imagined loss of sexual power.”[1] In a likewise manner, differences between the two poems, if they are addressed at all, are treated as differences in meaning, reference or degree.

It is on the level of theme that Richard J. Finneran captures the main dissimilarity between the texts. According to him, “Sailing to Byzantium” explicates the reasons for the necessity of Art, while “Byzantium” considers how a work of art is created.[2] Marjorie Perloff, who bases her analyses on formal considerations (rhyme pattern), also places the difference on the level of meaning, suggesting that “Sailing to Byzantium” expresses tensions as opposed to “Byzantium,” which is characterized by reconciliation.[3] F. A. C. Wilson, capturing the difference on the level of symbols, sees the central element, Byzantium, in “Sailing to Byzantium” as referring to the realm of intellect and spirit, while the same word in “Byzantium,” according to him, symbolizes life after death.[4] Just as the nature of the underlying troubling experience and the interpretation of symbols in these two poems remain unclear, so it remains uncertain to what “Byzantium” may actually refer to in the texts. Finneran enters into polemics with Frederick L. Gwynn, who argues that the city in “Sailing to Byzantium” is taken from its real-world counterpart in the early sixth century (what, as he suggests, might correspond to Yeats’s Phase 15), while the Byzantium in “Byzantium” is

[1] T. R. Henn, “Byzantium,” in *The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (London: Metheun, 1965), 220–237, p. 236. See also Brenda S. Webster, “A Psychoanalytic Study: ‘Sailing to Byzantium’,” in *Yeats: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Palo Alto, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1973); reprinted in *Literary Theories in Praxis*, ed. Shirley F. Staton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 307–312.

[2] Richard J. Finneran, introduction to *William Butler Yeats: The Byzantium Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, The Merrill Literary Casebook Series (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1970), 1–10, p. 6.

[3] Marjorie Perloff, “The Rhyme Structure of the Byzantium Poems,” in *Rhyme and Meaning in the Poetry of Yeats* (New York: Humanities Press; The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1970), 122–131, 141–143; reprinted in *Literary Theories in Praxis*, 21–32, p. 21.

[4] F. A. C. Wilson, *W. B. Yeats and Tradition* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1958), p. 231.

modelled on the city as it stood around 1000 (which may correspond to Phase 28).[5] By contrast, Finneran, considering other sources, suggests that in both poems the model of the city was Byzantium in the 900s.[6]

According to a cursory glance on a portion of the analyses of the Byzantium poems, such are the differences which appear to have been considered most often, apart from passing remarks on the general nature of texts. These remarks treat “Byzantium” solely as a sequel to, or even a development over the previous poem, “Sailing to Byzantium.” G. S. Fraser remarks that “Sailing to Byzantium” is “rather abstract” compared to “Byzantium;”[7] and while T. R. Henn adds, in parentheses, that “Byzantium” “wears less well than the other [poem],” he also suggests that “in ‘Byzantium’ the system of tensions is more complex, the overtones more significant.”[8] John Unterecker simply states of “Sailing to Byzantium” that it is “clear enough,”[9] while A. G. Stock claims that it “explains itself.”[10] Finneran, it seems, agrees to a certain degree, admitting himself that “it is clearly a simpler poem than its companion-piece.”[11] Anthony L. Johnson also deems “Byzantium” to be more complicated, but not at all to its advantage: he suggests of “Byzantium” that “its obdurate resistance to glossing has been erected by some critics into a patent of aesthetic merit.”[12]

I do not think, however, that such remarks (often bordering on value judgments) are to be done away with. Instead, they should be treated as genuine responses from educated readers, and textual evidence should be searched for to account for their apparent congruence.

In this essay, I will analyse both Byzantium poems. The aim of my analyses is to point out an underlying, basic difference between the two texts, which may also account for why “Sailing to Byzantium” strikes most readers as simpler or less complex than “Byzantium.” This difference, however, shall not be sought on the levels of interpretation or referentiality, but on the textual level, or, one might say, in the structural set-up of the poems. I will argue that while “Sailing to Byzantium” does converge toward symbolism, “Byzantium” is a genuinely symbolic poem, especially if read *against* the previous text. I am not, however, suggesting that “Byzantium” is a development over the previous poem, especially as the differences between the two texts point to various directions.

In my analyses I will primarily adopt an approach based on the reception of the poems by a present-day reader. I will, in other words, limit references to the biographical Author, either his life, other writings, knowledge, or a (re)constructed compositional process.[13] Instead, I attempt to focus on the texts themselves (their final versions), and seek intra- and intertextual features, similarities and dissimilarities. The relations to be pointed out may, hopefully, further our understanding of the workings of the two poems and their continuingly strong effect on us as readers.

[5] Frederick L. Gwynn, “Yeats’s Byzantium and its Sources,” *Philological Quarterly* XXXII (January 1953) 9–21, pp. 10–11.

[6] Finneran, pp. 3–5.

[7] G. S. Fraser, “Yeats’s Byzantium,” *Critical Quarterly* II (Autumn 1960) 253–261, p. 256.

[8] Henn, pp. 236, 228.

[9] John Unterecker, *A Reader’s Guide to W. B. Yeats* (New York: Noonday Press, 1959), p. 171.

[10] A. G. Stock, *W. B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 202.

[11] Finneran, p. 7.

[12] Anthony L. Johnson, “Sign, Structure, and Self-Reference in W. B. Yeats’s ‘Sailing to Byzantium’,” *Annali della Scuola normale superiore di Pisa, Classe di lettere e filosofia* 8 (1978) 213–247; reprinted in *Literary Theories in Praxis,* 135–154, p. 135.

[13] Yeats’s manuscripts have been considered by Jeffares in A. Norman Jeffares, “The Byzantine Poems of W. B. Yeats,” *The Review of English Studies* 22.85 (January 1946) 44–52; a meticulous analysis has been provided by Bradford in Curtis Bradford, “Yeats’s Byzantium Poems: A Study of Their Development,” *PMLA* 75.1 (March 1960) 110–125.

The concepts and strategies I will utilize in my readings are derived partly from Alexander A. Potebnja’s theory of literature and partly from other structuralist approaches. For easier reference, I have coined the phrase “representational framework” to refer to this approach. Scrutinizing it further in application has, in fact, been an indirect aim of the following analyses. The framework focuses both on larger structures or *images* and on their building blocks, on elements on the level of words. This latter facet, which echoes close reading, is anticipated by David I. Masson, who, in the first half of his treatise, considered repeated words and their contexts in “Byzantium” in a way reminiscent of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s analyses of myths based on mythemes.[14] Johnson’s structuralist analysis is also instructive in this respect.

Of image-based reading, precisely what I set out to provide of the two poems, William Empson declares: “I find here a breath-taking assumption that language can never be used to tell a story; that the only ‘literal’ meaning it can have is the pictures it makes in your head.”[15] Empson’s intention was to criticize F. A. C. Wilson’s approach to Yeats’s poetry in *W. B. Yeats and Tradition*, claiming that Wilson disregarded literal meaning in favour of a symbolical one. And yet I think that—albeit unintentionally—Empson here gave a key to an understanding of the workings of the Byzantium poems. I agree with Caroline Roberts, who sees Yeats’s language as one that demonstrates that “all language is irreducibly figural.”[16] Let me start my analyses with a brief introduction of the framework I will attempt to utilize.

The Representational Framework[17]

This framework, generally speaking, postulates that the extratextual author gains representation in the form of an intratextual author or the lyrical I, and that the original experience of the extratextual author gains representation in the text in a visual model centred around subjects, or, as I shall refer to them, exhibits. Such a segregation of extratextual and intratextual layers—along with certain categories I shall introduce—may strike one as outmoded from a post-structuralist point of view. However, these concepts and categories prove to be flexible enough to incorporate suggestions that have been used to criticize structuralist approaches to literature.

Parts of the framework have been influenced by the theory of Alexander A. Potebnja on the threefold structure of literary works, which has been presented and meticulously analysed in a monograph by John Fizer.[18] This framework postulates the existence of three layers both in the process of composition and in that of reception of a work of art; the processes are regarded symmetric.

Layer III is, on the first level of approximation, situated outside the work. In the compositional process, it is the original experience, problem, etc. experienced by the author which becomes represented—according to this model—in the work of art. In reception, layer III is the interpretation created by a reader. Generally, it is supposed that the original experience of the biographical author is irrecoverable from the text and that interpretation differs among readers. *Layer I* is the textual level. It is the message transmitted during the

[14] David I. Masson, “Word and Sound in Yeats’ ‘Byzantium’,” *ELH* 20.2 (June 1953) 136–160.

[15] William Empson, “Mr. Wilson on the Byzantium Poems,” *A Review of English Literature* I (July 1960) 51–56, pp. 53–54.

[16] Caroline Roberts, “Images ‘Fresh Images Beget’: Yeats, De Man, and Deconstruction,” in *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies* XVI, ed. Richard J. Finneran (Ann Arbor, MI.: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 84–99, p. 85.

[17] The following concepts were influenced by Éva Babits’ views and theories presented during discussions between 1997 and 2001.

[18] John Fizer, *Alexander A. Potebnja’s Psycholinguistic Theory of Literature: A Metacritical Inquiry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute–Harvard University Press, 1988).

artistic communication, but it can also be considered to contain connotations and associative elements generally available to members of the interpretive community the artistic discourse is taking place in. And, finally, *layer II* is defined as the structures generated by the text in the reader during the act of reading. Theoretically, this layer is supposed to contain all possible structures; I suggest that it is during interpretation (generation of layer III) that readers emphasize certain structures in line with their interpretation and suppress others. This suggestion could be complemented by the idea that the generation of layer III might be optional at least in the sense of formulating a conscious and verbalized (thus necessarily abstracted) interpretation of an artwork. Layer II, therefore, has a dual nature. On the one hand, strictly speaking, it exists only in the reader and is a result of reading; on the other, during its generation, in theory, no inter-reader differences have yet been introduced. It is supposed, in other words, that layer II is identical across readers and that it contains the same structures in both the reception and composition processes.

In Potebnja’s theory, a similar set of three layers can be found: the external form (cf. layer I), the internal form (layer II) and signification, content or idea (layer III).[19] His views agree with mine in suggesting that signification “changes markedly in every new perception;”[20] in that the internal form tends to expire, reducing the structure of literary works “to two constituents—external form and signification—and its potential polysemy to a referential monosemy;” and in that one of the main differences between poetic and non-poetic (scientific, in the extreme) texts is that the latter lack internal form.[21]

Despite these similarities, there are also a number of differences between my framework and Potebnja’s theory. Most importantly, Potebnja appears to have embedded the above-cited ideas in an inherently Romantic and 19th-century view of language, suggesting, for example, that language mirrors and originates from perception.[22] Moreover, in his view, the poetic work contains its internal form, which, like the external one, is internalized during the act of reading.[23] Opposed to this view, I hold that it is only the external form (layer I) that is transmitted and internalized in the strict sense. The linguistically coded nature of layer II in Potebnja’s theory possibly makes more sense if one considers his suggestion that the word has a threefold structure identical to that of literary texts[24]—a notion entirely missing from the framework I am presenting.

Similarly to Potebnja, I regard one of the central structural building blocks of layer II the *image.* In the present framework, it functions as a sample structure with which it is attempted to analyse and describe structures on layer II. For Potebnja, however,

> while it was relatively simple to define the internal form of the word, inasmuch as Potebnja equated it with its etymon, the image of the work of poetic art eluded an easy definition. His theory, in spite of the central importance of internal form, gave no definition of the image.[25]

[19] Fizer, pp. 23, 37.

[20] Alexander A. Potebnja, *Из записок по теории словесности [Notes on the Theory of Verbality]* (Kharkiv: Izd. M. F. Potebni, 1905), Slavic Printings and Reprints, 128 (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), p. 101; quoted in Fizer, p. 23.

[21] Fizer, pp. 27 (see also 33), 36.

[22] These ideas pervade his writings *Мысль и язык [Thought and Language], Из записок по теории словесности [Notes on the Theory of Verbality],* and *Из лекций по теории словесности [Lectures on the Theory of Verbality],* trans. to Hungarian G. S. Horváth, K. Szitár, K. Horváth, A. Molnár, K. H. Végh, in *Poétika és nyelvelmélet [Poetics and Language Theory],* ed. Árpád Kovács (Budapest: Argumentum, 2002), 5–250.

[23] Fizer, p. 47.

[24] Fizer, passim, see especially p. 37.

[25] Fizer, pp. 40–41.

My definition of the image is relatively simple and flexible. It is a set of related textual elements which describe—that is, create a visualizable model of—the element at the centre of the image, the *exhibit.* The image and its exhibit are said to be *motivated* by elements related to them. The elements that I consider capable of motivating images are those which are able to trigger immediate (usually visual) associations. I shall use *concreteness* in the sense that a concrete element triggers more associations than an *abstract* or conceptual one. These properties do not imply a difference of character; rather, they represent a one-dimensional graded categorization. Concreteness, moreover, is essentially the same as the level of abstraction of names of objects (categories) as defined in cognitive science, and as used, among others, by Eleanor Rosch.[26] According to her definitions, when two object names (categories) are related to each other via class inclusion, it is easy to determine their relative concreteness, as greater inclusiveness means a higher level of abstraction. To take an example, *swallow* is more concrete and less abstract than *bird,* as the latter contains the category *swallow,* and the subordinate category is not exhaustive of *bird,* the superordinate one. This implies that *swallow* has a more specific size, outline and plumage than a generalized *bird,* even if prototypicality is taken into account. *Swallow* is also associated with *summer* based on the idiom, which contributes further to the associations this element can trigger. In a similar fashion, short noun phrases (e.g. *kitchen table, stone table*) are more concrete than what they specify (*table*).

When, however, none of the elements (categories) are included in the other, an indirect comparison has to be made. Rosch introduces the notion of *basic objects* (e.g. *table*) which are the most inclusive categories whose members still share a large number of attributes. She also suggests that most basic objects are at the same level of abstraction.[27] I consider basic objects the most abstract elements that can motivate images, as superordinate categories (e.g. *furniture*), that is, concepts, are usually not visualizable enough. In fact, Rosch suggests that basic objects are the most inclusive categories which can have a mental image.[28] With basic objects defined, it is possible to compare the concreteness of two unrelated elements by comparing their perceived distance from, that is, their inclusiveness relative to their respective basic objects.

Regarding grammatical categories, I have found that elements motivating images are most often nouns or short noun phrases. However, certain verbs (consider *fighting* or *plucking,* for example) or other content words may also be visual enough to be included in this class.[29]

Analysing the distribution of these elements has proved fruitful partly because they can be regarded as unaltered during their translation from layer I to layer II in the perception process. In this respect, these elements behave like minimal, atomic building blocks, and based on this property, I also refer to them as *minemes.* It can also be suggested that the set of elements associated with a mineme is more or less fixed in a given interpretive community, while, at the same time, such associations will, naturally, be altered by the context, by other minemes in the same image.

This framework goes further, however, in forcing a prescribed structural set-up on layer II. It postulates that images themselves are ordered hierarchically allowing images to be part of, or to motivate, larger images as minemes do. Images at the centres of these hierarchies are

[26]Eleanor Rosch, “Principles of Categorization” (1978), in *Concepts: Core Readings*, ed. Eric Margolis and Stephen Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 189–206.

[27] Rosch, pp. 192, 191.

[28] Rosch, p. 195.

[29]Rosch herself extended the notion of basic objects to events. Moreover, concreteness and abstractness may also be related to the amount of information a given element conveys. In this respect, *swallow* is more concrete than *bird* because it selects a more limited set of entities. In order to restrict the number of entities an element refers to, it needs to provide more information regarding the entities themselves, and a greater amount of information enriches an image to a greater degree.

basic images. Sometimes it is possible to select one basic image for a whole work, the global basic image, the exhibit of which is the *global exhibit* of the text.[30]

It is also worth noting that while Potebnja himself did not define the image, Fizer attempted to abstract a definition from his arguments. According to him, Potebnja regarded the construction of images as happening either step by step, combining representations in words, or suddenly, at certain points in the text, where the internal form of a word dominates those around it.[31] My definition of the image appears to be a combination of these two modes inasmuch as every image is postulated to have a centre while it is enriched by a series of other elements at the same time.

I define the *theme* of a work of art as its experience or interpretation abstracted to a level which is common to all interpretations and the experience. (In this framework it is supposed that it is possible to do so based on the similarity of readers in an interpretive community.) *Metathesis* refers to the relationship between the represented theme / experience / interpretation on layer III and the representing layers II & I. In other words, it relates the experience centred around the theme to the representation centred around the global exhibit of a work. If there is no metathesis, that is, if layer III is rendered directly into layer I, and layer II is missing, then the text is considered to be non-artistic.

The *lyrical I* is the intratextual addresser of the message in the artistic communication. I termed the relationship between the author and its representation, the lyrical I *alienation,* mainly because I generally suppose them to be distinct and connected by nothing else than the representational relationship. I regard metathesis and alienation parallel and hardly separable processes, as one describes rendering the object, the other the subject of an experience into the object and the subject of a representation. Thus, as far as the scope of the present framework reaches, alienation, similarly to metathesis, is required for artistic texts. This requirement echoes the notion of the death of the author as a necessary step (technique) in writing. T. S. Eliot and Mark Schorer, among others, refer to the alienation of the experience from the original experiencer, the author, as essential in artistic creation.[32]

Images, however, are not the only tools with which the distribution of minemes on layer II can be investigated. Elements can be divided into two categories according to the roles they play in figures as similes, metaphors and symbols.

The descriptive relationship between two elements in a simile or a metaphor is asymmetrical. While both the described and the describer elements (or the tenor and the vehicle in the case of metaphors) are evoked, it is the implicit goal of these figures to provide further information about the described using the describer. While it does happen that the describers build up a hidden textual layer inside the work, or that the described and the describer are reversed, these techniques are notable especially because they deviate from the norm. The describer is thus usually secondary to the described and is referred to only in the context of the latter, while it is the described that the focus falls on and is understood as the one that needs to be placed alongside other elements in the text. Take, as an example, the following sentence: “He winced at the sight of the laundry as his hand was already as dry as the back of a camel after a week’s journey in the Sahara.” In this very basic case of an explicit simile, it is immediately understood that the focus falls on the *hand,* and that while a vivid image of the desert might be evoked, it is not to be aligned with *laundry, wincing* and *hand.* In other words, all minemes in the describer are removed from the sphere of the described, and

[30] Despite certain differences, Potebnja’s “main image” might be related to what I mean by basic images. See Fizer, p. 45.

[31] Fizer, p. 48.

[32] See T. S. Eliot “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), in *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader,* ed. D. Lodge (London: Longman, 1972), 71–77; and Mark Schorer, “Technique as Discovery,” in *The World We Imagine* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), 3–23.

they are hardly ever thought of as being in a physical connection with them. Referring to the imaginable physical environment of an element as its *reality,* this means that the describer is generally absent from the reality of the described, and that the described is almost always considered to belong to the reality of its larger textual context or to that of the text itself.

Taking this statement to the extreme, by investigating various figures in a text, it may be possible to determine which elements create its reality, and which are the ones that are absent from it; in other words, which minemes function more as describeds and which more as describers. Following Éva Babits's terminology, I will refer to the class of describeds as *view* or *layer A,* and to the class of describers as *vision* or *layer B.*

As I attempted to show in my paper titled "Incorporation and Dissociation: Changes in the A/B Structure between Realism and Modernism,"[33] the figure of the symbol can be analysed as a describer element originally belonging to layer B but moving to layer A to take the place of an absent described. This proposed analysis is not without parallels. It is, among others, closely related to Roman Ingarden's remarks on symbolization:

> It is part of the essence of the symbolizing function that (1) what is symbolized and that which symbolizes it belong to *different* worlds […] (2) what is symbolized is in fact only 'symbolized' and *cannot* attain self-presentation. As something symbolized, it is, according to its essence *directly* inaccessible, it is that which does not show itself.[34]

In the same paper, I also argued that myths essentially have a similar internal structure, which suggestion, in turn, can be related to the following observations on the nature of myths by S. A. Tokarev and Y. M. Meletinsky:

> Symbolism is the most important feature of myths, [which] manifests itself in the unclear distinction between subject and object, between object and sign […]. Concrete objects, without losing their tangibility, may become signs of other objects or phenomena, that is, they may replace [represent] them symbolically.[35]

These two propositions will, in fact, make it possible to assess the symbolic nature of the texts to be scrutinized.

"Sailing to Byzantium"

"Sailing to Byzantium" was written in 1926–1927, and first appeared in *October Blast* in 1927 and later as the opening poem in Yeats's volume of poetry titled *The Tower* in 1928. As each stanza of the poem can be read as a self-contained image or a pair of images, let me start studying the text by considering its stanzas one by one.

The minemes found in the second sentence of the first stanza—which spans almost the whole portion—motivate an image describing a series of habitats bursting with life (see, for example, *young, birds, salmon, mackerel, summer*)—and temporality, as added by the more conceptual phrases in lines 3 ("Those dying generations") and 6 ("Whatever is begotten, born,

[33] In *Első Század* 2006/2: 81–102.

[34] Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature,* trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 299–300.

[35] S. A. Tokarev and Y. M. Meletinsky, "Mitológia," in *Mitológiai enciklopédia,* ed. S. A. Tokarev et al., trans. György Bárány et al. (Budapest: Gondolat, 1988), 1:11–21, p. 1:13. The excerpt appears here in my translation from the Hungarian.

and dies”).[36] With this image the mineme *old men* is contrasted, which appears to be aligned with the “monuments of unaging intellect” (8). These, in turn, are described as being in opposition to the life-image built up during the course of the stanza. This dualistic arrangement of elements will be perceivable throughout the poem, with nearly all minemes clearly belonging to the *life* or the *monument* (art) side of the world-model the poem appears to suggest.

The exhibit of this stanza may be the *young* as appears in the first line, as it is this mineme that in itself carries the notion of life and reproduction which all other, connected elements point to; and which the mineme *old men* is contrasted with. The use of “fish, flesh, or fowl” in line 5 is worth a closer perusal, especially in the light of this suggestion. It is not only a list of elements easily merging with *birds, salmon* or *mackerel,* but they also span a *whole* in the sense of “all of a type of thing,” as the negative of this list, “it is neither fish, flesh, nor fowl” means “a food fit for no class of people.”[37]

The second stanza does not offer itself to an image-based reading easily. There are few words or phrases that are undoubtedly analyzable as minemes (*aged man, tattered coat, stick, hands, tatter, dress, monument,* to list the ones which, in my view, are more visualizable), and most of these elements describe the *aged man* employing a metaphor that spans the first two lines (“An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick”), and which is also enriched by the introduction of the *soul* and its *mortal dress.* This latter element, through the repetition of the notion of *tatter* (11–12), is linked to the element the metaphor described, the *aged man.* This reading implies that the element most motivated by this scarecrow-image is the *aged man,* which, thus, serves as the exhibit of this portion of the poem. The second half of the stanza, however, contains almost no easily visualizable elements. The fact that it is at this point that the first reference to the lyrical I (“And therefore I have sailed the seas” [15]) is found will be of special importance when analysing the overall structure of the poem.

The dualism of the first stanza continues in this one as well. The set of minemes consisting of a song-less *aged man, tattered coat, stick* and *mortal dress* is contrasted with *singing,* for “An aged man is but a paltry thing […] unless / Soul clap its hands and sing” (9–12). *Singing,* in turn, is linked to the *monuments* already introduced at the end of the previous section: “Nor is there singing school but studying / Monuments of its own magnificence” (14–15). With the ending, it becomes apparent that such monuments are to be found in Byzantium.

The dualistic distribution of minemes also characterizes the third stanza, where the *sages,* aligned with *gold, mosaic, wall, fire, gyre, perne*[38] and the concepts *artifice* and *eternity* are set in opposition to the *heart* of the lyrical I, linked to mortality, to a *dying animal* (21–22). The elements motivating an image of an eternal artwork, the mosaic, are introduced by a rhetoric figure, a simile, as the “sages [are] standing in God’s holy fire / *As* in the gold mosaic of a wall” (17–18, my emphasis). Because of this fact, and in line with the definition of layers A and B, the mosaic and the elements related to it will reside on layer B.

[36] References to the poems are to W. B. Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium,” in *Yeats’s Poems,* ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan–Papermac, 1989), 301–302, 363–364, respectively. All parenthesized references are by line numbers.

[37] E. Cobham Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus, 1898; Bartleby.com, 2000), s.v. “fish$_3$” <http://www.bartleby.com/81/6492.html>.

[38] *Gyre* and *perne* may only be partially decipherable for a reader less familiar with Yeats’s personal mythology and terminology, and thus, strictly speaking, any reading beyond the literal meaning of *gyre* should be excluded from an analysis which attempts to disregard information related to the biographical author. This suggestion is supported by the fact that the editors of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* felt it necessary to explicate the phrase in question in a footnote, attributing it the meaning *to “whirl round in a spiral motion”* based on a reading of *perne* (pirn) as *bobbin.* This motion is then connected to the all-encompassing force of fate and history in Yeats’s system (*The Norton Anthology of English Literature,* 7th ed., ed. M. H. Abrams et al. [New York, London: W. W. Norton, 2000], 2:2110).

One finds the same set-up in the last stanza, where the image of the golden handiwork is introduced as “a form *as* Grecian goldsmiths make” (27, my emphasis) with the help of a simile continuing for three lines. This image is enriched further by a reference probably to an automaton of Byzantine Emperor Theophilos Ikonomachos in the last three lines of the poem. This automaton consisted of artificial birds emitting various sounds on a tree, all of gilded bronze;[39] which are thus “of hammered gold” and are “set upon a golden bough to sing” (28, 30).

Determining the exhibit of the previous, the third stanza might be problematic, as this portion is the one which yields least to a reading based on minemes. Once again, this characteristic coincides with a prominent textual presence of the lyrical I. Still, as most minemes motivate the image centred around the *sages* (consider *fire, gold, mosaic, wall*), this may be the exhibit searched for.

Within stanza four, determining the exhibit is an easier task, as the text culminates in the description of the automaton, of which the most important part is what the lyrical I strives to become, an artificial, gilded bronze bird. As this, concrete image flows naturally from and specifies the previous, more general “form as Grecian goldsmiths make” (27), I regard *bird* as the exhibit. It has an inverse relation with the lyrical I, as with the desired transition to the eternal state, direct references to the lyrical I gradually disappear from the text, as if it was dissolved in the anonymity of eternity. The last reference, a personal pronoun, is to “*my* bodily form” (26).

The temporal dimension of the poem, as shown by the exhibits of the stanzas, spans almost a human lifetime. From the *young* of the first stanza, the description moves on to the *aged man,* culminating at the *sages* of stanza three, whom are situated half in the natural, half in the eternal world already. By the beginning of the fourth, the status of being “out of nature” is already reached by—ironically and in a circular manner—the exhibit *bird,* an originally natural element.

As an aside, let me point out that the life cycle as presented in this poem might be related to a whole cycle in Yeats’s system of Lunar Phases “ending” in complete objectivity, in, perhaps, the sages, monuments and Byzantium. This would imply that the poem is not passively “stuck” in Byzantium as Phase 15, as suggested by Frederick L. Gwynn, but provides a dynamic model of this facet of Yeats’s system.

From the temporal perspective, the appearance of the lyrical I in the second stanza has a particular significance, as it defines the lyrical I as similar to the *aged man* the stanza in question describes. This situatedness of the lyrical I is further supported by the slightly distanced depiction of the country of the young with which the poem begins. Moreover, in earlier drafts of the text, this situatedness was even more apparent. In the composition process of “Sailing to Byzantium” as reconstructed by Curtis Bradford, the successive drafts show not only an eradication of specifically Irish allusions and the abandonment of the “poet of the Middle Ages” that Bradford sees as a model for the lyrical I, but also a gradual obliteration of direct references to the lyrical I. A first version of a portion that made it to the published poem

[39] Liudprand reported on this automaton when sent on an embassy to Constantinople in 949. See Liutprandus Cremonensis, *Antapodosis,* in *Patrologia Latina,* ed. Jacques Paul Migne (Paris, 1854), vol. 136, column 0895. I thank Anna Tüskés for her kind help in locating this source. Additionally, a long list of possible sources has been compiled for the artificial bird imagery in the two Byzantium poems based on various considerations. Jeffares, who was advised by Mrs. Yeats on her husband’s readings, ultimately decides that the exact source cannot be identified. Thomas L. Dume, in his “Yeats’ Golden Tree and Birds in the Byzantium Poems” (*Modern Language Notes* 67.6 [June 1952] 404–407), lists a number of books Yeats most probably read; the list is lengthened by Gwynn’s account of possible analogues in other works (see especially pp. 13–18). Perhaps one of the most intriguing suggestions is made by Ernest Schanzer, who, in an essay titled “ ‘Sailing to Byzantium,’ Keats, and Andersen” (*English Studies* XLI [December 1960] 376–380), links the image to Andersen’s tale “The Emperor’s Nightingale.”

contains a large amount of such direct references that make it clear that the poem evolved from a text with a highly personal tone:

> As in God’s love will refuse my prayer
> When prostrate on the marble step I fall
> And cry aloud—“I sicken with desire
> And fastened to a dying animal
> Cannot endure my life—O gather me
> Into the artifice of eternity.”[40]

Determining the global exhibit of “Sailing to Byzantium” is hindered by the fact that the stanzas present themselves as self-contained, separate images; and almost none of their exhibits is motivated by the other images, which could elevate a local exhibit to the global level. There are, however, two related elements which reappear, in one form or another, in most images: *bird* and *song.* While, strictly speaking, *bird* appears only in the first and in the last stanzas via the reference to the Byzantine machinery, the element of *song,* if the verbal form is regarded as an equivalent, does appear in each image. Based on this fact, I regard the *bird–song* complex as the global exhibit of the poem, the elements placed at the centre of layer II. Furthermore, these are the two elements that do not conform to the dual arrangement of minemes. In the first stanza, both *bird* and *song* are aligned with the ageing, natural world (see “birds in the trees / —Those dying generations—at their song” [2–3]), while as soon as in the second stanza, *singing* is presented as something that lifts the mortal *old man* out of its earthly existence: “An aged man is but a paltry thing […] unless / Soul clap its hands and *sing”* (9–11, my emphasis). In the fourth stanza, the metal *bird* is precisely what the lyrical I strives to become in order to be preserved outside nature. In other words, the *bird–song* complex, the global exhibit, bridges the two realms, the mortal, natural world and the eternal world of art.

Although analyses do not agree on the meanings and referents of specific elements, and on the existence and nature of a more general “idea” behind contrasting art with nature and mortality, that is, the ephemeral with the eternal; they all seem to agree that this dichotomy is a central theme in the poem, as also shown by the dual arrangement of minemes. In some respect, the same underlying theme appears to be elaborated in John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” but, as William Empson points out, Yeats’s poem may contain a pinch of self-mockery as the lyrical I strives to become a “clockwork dickey-bird […] scolding like Donald Duck.”[41] Richard J. Finneran interprets the last four lines along similar lines, suggesting that to sing “to keep a drowsy Emperor awake” and “to lords and ladies of Byzantium” (29, 31) demeans the artificial bird and its desired eternal state in Art. Moreover, it would sing of mutability, of “what is past, or passing, or to come” (32), hence we are led back to ephemeral nature in a complete cycle.[42]

Incidentally, this reinterpretation of *bird* more as a referential, even natural thing as opposed to a kind of an emblem which state it reached in the Byzantine setting may provide a miniature model of Paul de Man’s view on the progress of Yeats’s oeuvre as first moving from natural imagery to symbols / emblems, but then “Yeats soon wearies of a purely emblematic style, dismisses it as allegory or mere ‘embroideries’ and returns, after 1900, to what seems to be a more natural kind of image.”[43]

[40] Bradford, p. 113. I have omitted phrases deleted in the manuscript.

[41] Empson, p. 55.

[42] Finneran, pp. 6–7.

[43] Paul de Man, “Image and Emblem in Yeats,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1984), 145–238, p. 172.

In summary, the poem does not appear to be image-driven in the sense that it contains passages which resist a mineme- and image-based reading, and that the minemes themselves appear to be more abstract. It will be of special importance that, according to the separation of minemes between layers A and B, the description of Byzantium resides in its entirety on layer B.

Sailing to “Byzantium”

The cyclical structure of “Sailing to Byzantium” outlined above may be behind the perhaps most often cited reactions to the poem. Yeats appears to have received this criticism on “Sailing to Byzantium” from his friend T. Sturge Moore, which, ultimately, appears to have led to the writing of “Byzantium.” Moore wrote: “[‘Sailing to Byzantium’] lets me down in the fourth [stanza], as such a goldsmith’s bird is as much nature as a man’s body.”[44] Indeed, the element *bird,* as it bridges the natural and the eternal realms, is partly in nature. Moore’s criticism, therefore—contrary to a widespread suggestion—might not have been seen by Yeats as an observation that invalidated the structure of “Sailing to Byzantium.” It might have merely meant, as Yeats himself wrote to Moore, that “the idea needed exposition.”[45] Finneran, along similar lines, suggests that “Moore had explicated the main idea of ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ rather precisely—while thinking that the poem was attempting to say something else.”[46]

“Byzantium,” written in 1930, does reiterate many of the elements of “Sailing to Byzantium”; moreover, its internal structure shares some characteristics with the other poem. In “Byzantium,” the stanzas also seem to motivate separate images, but they are connected by more than a temporal link and the recurrence of certain minemes—connections that could also be found in the earlier poem.

At the beginning of the first stanza, we find the element of the *Emperor,* whose “soldiery are abed” (2). The description of dusk already contains a dual set-up of elements reminiscent of the two contrary worlds of “Sailing to Byzantium.” On the one hand is “a starlit or moonlit dome” (5) which “disdains” things placed on the other: *man, complexities, fury, mire, veins.* These latter elements motivate a sub-image of mortal life in the same manner as the first stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium” contains a description of life in nature. Opposed to this image one finds celestial elements (*star, moon*) and an artificial, artistic element serving as the exhibit of this portion of the text (*dome*), which may evoke the idea of eternity as represented in / by undecaying, seemingly timeless phenomena.

The second stanza starts with a rhetoric device that will be repeated in the third one. The first two lines, “Before me floats an image, man or shade, / Shade more than man, more image than a shade” (9–10), introduce the description of an image centred around the element of the *mummy,* which includes its spiral wrappings: “Hades’ bobbin” is “bound in mummy-cloth” (11), and it “may unwind the winding path” (13). The result is an image-complex that reiterates the notion of spiralling movement from “Sailing to Byzantium” (c.f. “perne in a gyre” [19]), and therefore—turning to the extratextual author—may be related to Yeats’s idea of the gyre, which controls fate and the progress of the world. The presence of *bobbin*—like that of *perne* (possibly *pirn, bobbin*) in “Sailing to Byzantium”—may reinforce this connection by evoking the Fates, who control the thread of life.

It is this mummy-image that is further motivated by the introduction of the element *mouth,* itself serving as a centre to a sub-image spanning lines 13–14. This image, which may refer to the “Opening of the Mouth” ritual in ancient Egypt, is that of a mouth which is devoid of its

[44] Finneran, p. 5, quoting *W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence, 1901–1937,* ed. Ursula Bridge (New York, 1953), p. 162.

[45] Finneran, p. 5, quoting *W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore,* p. 164.

[46] Finneran, p. 5.

crucial characteristics, as it “has no moisture and no breath”—like a mouth of a mummy—, and which, as it may summon “breathless mouths” (14), appears to have been conjured up by a member of its own kind; which, in other words, is described as autogenetic.

It is in this stanza that the lyrical I appears for the first and for the last time in the poem. Line 9 contains a reference to “me,” before whom the mummy-image appears, and lines 15 and 16 make it clear that the lyrical I approves of the appearance of the vision: “I hail the superhuman.” With the verbs *hail* and *call,* these lines (along with the beginning of the stanza) almost merge the lyrical I with the implied author during the act of composition, for it is the author before whom the vision appears that is transformed into the text.

The third stanza starts with the same rhetorical device as the second one, first listing elements joined by the conjunction “or,” then, in the second line, expressing a preference for one element over the others: “Miracle, bird or golden handiwork, / More miracle than bird or handiwork” (17–18). In this case, the elements *bird* and *gold* are introduced, which have also played important roles in the previous poem. *Bird* here is described more or less in the same manner as in the last stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium,” with the same reference to the Byzantine construction. What is notable here is the recurrence of the elements *star* and *moon*, as the artificial bird is “planted on the star-lit golden bough” (19) and is “by the moon embittered” (21). In the first stanza, these very elements were used to describe the *dome,* which was contrasted with *man* described by *complexities, fury, mire* and *veins*—here repeated as *complexities, mire* and *blood* in lines 23–24, now related to the *common bird.* In other words, the structure of this stanza also conforms to the dualistic set-up of minemes, with the *bird* (the exhibit of this part of the text) appearing on both sides, on one as a metal one, on the other as the common bird.

The exhibit of the image in stanza four is the *flame.* Its description, spanning all the eight lines, mirrors that of the *mouth* in lines 13–14. On the textual level, the expression in line 26: “Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit” echoes “a mouth that has no moisture and no breath,” while thematically, the concept of the mouth devoid of mouth-ness surfaces in the concept of an un-flame-like flame described in lines 27 and 32: a flame no “storm disturbs;” a “flame that cannot singe a sleeve.” Similarly to the *mouth,* the *flame* is also attributed an autogenetic nature. The usual sources of fire have already been denied in line 26, while line 27 expresses the notion of autogenesis directly: “flames begotten of flame.”

The question naturally arises that if all minemes are arranged in the dual structure of the material world and the eternal one, to which side *mouth* and *fire* belong. Since both of them are deprived of their everyday qualities, and as they are autogenetic, they have no heterogeneous antecedents, that is to say, they are supposed to have been in existence since the beginning of times, they appear to belong to the eternal realm. Furthermore, this placement of *fire* is consistent with its usage in “Sailing to Byzantium,” where it was aligned with *holy*-ness, *gold* and the *sages.*

Complexities and *fury* reappear in line 29: “complexities of fury leave,” presumably fleeing from the *spirits,* which are “blood-begotten” (28), that is, they originate from the realm to which *man* belongs (c.f. “veins” and “blood” in lines 6–8 and 24). It is the fire that burns away the material side of *man,* as complexities of fury are “Dying into […] / An agony of flame” (29–32). As *spirits* are both contrasted with *complexities* and *fury,* and they originate from the world of *man,* they are also presented as elements that bridge the ephemeral and the eternal realms.

Stanza five furnishes us with one further element bridging the two worlds, its exhibit, the *dolphin.* The eternal realm is represented by the now cleansed *spirits,* which, however, are “astraddle on the dolphin’s mire and blood” (33), that is, on the material, earthly side of the creatures. The spirits are to be carried across the “dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea” (40). In this stanza, one can also witness the reappearance of *Emperor* and *gong* from stanza one,

creating a frame around the poem. While it is as soon as in the fourth stanza that the element *Emperor* reappears—along with an important time adverbial—, it is the fifth stanza, where it is paired with *gong*, that serves as a counterpart, or a continuation, a closure of the scene starting in the first one. This technique may enhance a feeling of formal cohesion, thus creating a sense of unity in the reader.

Like “Sailing to Byzantium,” this poem also has a temporal dimension. The first line suggests that the time is around dusk, while by the 25th line, it is already “at midnight.” According to these elements, the narrative layer of the poem spans a few hours only up to the moment usually associated with supernatural events. This temporal span is more concrete and is more closely connected to the representation, to the images, than the time-span of “Sailing to Byzantium,” which covers a whole course of life and is more related to the interpretation.

Since the structure of “Byzantium” is similar to that of “Sailing to Byzantium” in that it also contains a series of almost self-contained images, I will follow the same strategy of establishing the global exhibit of this poem; namely, by searching for minemes which are present in most of the images. Similarly to the case of the previous poem, and somewhat stretching the definition of the exhibit, I suggest that it is not a single mineme that is the global exhibit of the poem, but a complex of several ones. Since the elements *complexity, fury, mire, vein / blood* appear in all images (stanzas) except the second one, let me assume that on layer II of “Byzantium,” they occupy the position of the global exhibit.

The properties of the minemes in the two poems show interesting tendencies if compared to each other. Generally, these elements in “Byzantium” appear to be more concrete, that is, more readily visualizable, than the ones in “Sailing to Byzantium.” To illustrate this proposition, let me compare the minemes in the two bird-images in the two poems instead of attempting to catalogue all elements in the texts which are analysable as minemes. Specifically, the comparison is between the fourth stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium,” consisting of 8 lines and 58 words, and the third stanza of “Byzantium,” containing 8 lines and 47 words. Table 1 lists words and short phrases that I consider minemes.

Table 1.
Minemes in One Stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium”

	“Sailing to Byzantium” lines 25–32	“Byzantium” lines 17–24
total number of words	58	47
minemes	nature drowsy Emperor lords ladies Grecian goldsmiths hammered gold gold enamelling golden bough	bird *x2* cocks of Hades moon metal common bird petal mire blood golden handiwork *x2* star-lit golden bough
number of words selected	13	19
percentage of words selected	22	40

In the analysed stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium,” 13 words have been selected as belonging to minemes (either stand-alone ones or integrated into phrases), whereas in the

other poem, I found 19 words related to minemes, of which one is not a content word. Taking into account the number of total words in these passages, the higher percentage of mineme-related words in “Byzantium” is striking. This phenomenon might be related to the more nominal style of the latter poem.

The sheer number of minemes, however, does not, in itself, guarantee a more effective motivation of images. The quality of the minemes to trigger associations, to be visualizable, their concreteness, is a more important factor. Still, the concreteness of these elements shows the same difference between the poems. To take an example from the stanzas analysed above, the sub-image of the *bough* in “Sailing to Byzantium” is motivated by the sole adjective *golden*, whereas in “Byzantium,” *star-lit* can also be found adjoined to it. As suggested above, any further specification makes a mineme more concrete and more easily visualizable; therefore, *star-lit golden bough* is the less abstract element. Also, while the scrutinized stanza of “Byzantium” does contain a number of abstract minemes (e.g. *bird, metal*), the *mire, petal, cock* elements found among its one-word minemes are more concrete than *lords and ladies* or *nature* found in the stanza in the other poem. *Nature* is on the borderline of being a concept, and, as such, conveys only general visual information. It also includes *mire, petal* and *cock*, making it more abstract than those three elements. The phrase *lords and ladies*, in turn, refers to a whole social class, and I think it is closer to its respective basic object (*person*) than, for example, *cock* is to *bird*, the basic object that it is a part of. Similar comparisons may show that in the whole text of “Byzantium” minemes are more abundant and usually more concrete than in “Sailing to Byzantium.”

This effect is enhanced further if the mythological interpretation of the *dolphin* as a vehicle or avatar of the soul in transit is taken into account when reading “Byzantium.” The connotations raised by the “bobbin bound in mummy-cloth” (11) can also enrich a mythologized interpretation. As concreteness is primarily reliant on the ability of a mineme to trigger associations—which enables the reader to construct a more detailed visual model—, these mythological associations also suggest the more elaborated concreteness of the latter poem. “Sailing to Byzantium,” according to my reading, contains fewer elements with similar connotations, which is not to say that it is devoid of them. Like “Byzantium”, it also refers to the Fates through *perne* aligned with *gyre* (19); however, this reference might not be immediately interpretable for some readers. Conversely, *golden bough* (30) does open up a wide range of possible connections, but this element also appears in the later text, and, therefore, cannot contribute to the differences between the two poems.

This difference in concreteness also characterizes the exhibits of the stanzas of the two poems. Setting *bird* aside, which appears as a local exhibit in both texts, *young, aged man* and *sages*—the exhibits in “Sailing to Byzantium,” which are all subcategories of the rather general *person*, specified by mostly one property only—appear to be less concrete than the exhibits of “Byzantium”: *dome* (a quite specific subordinate category of the basic object *house*), *mummy* (a subcategory of *corpse*, or even the general *person*), and *dolphin* (following a naïve taxonomy, an easily visualizable subcategory of *fish*). *Flame*, the exhibit in “Byzantium” not mentioned so far, may be at the same level of abstraction as *aged man*. Moreover, *young, aged man, sages* and *bird* are more connected to the represented interpretation (layer III) than to the representing images (layer II), echoing the difference between the texts already established based on their different time-spans. Comparing the global exhibits yields similar results. The global exhibit of “Sailing to Byzantium,” *bird* and *song*, is a complex of two rather abstract minemes if compared to the minemes occupying this position in “Byzantium.” *Song* may be a basic-level object itself, but as it refers to an auditory phenomenon, it conveys little visual information. *Bird* is a good example for a basic-level object, and, perhaps more importantly, it contains a large number of subordinate objects (from *albatross* to *woodpecker*) designated by a single word. Turning to “Byzantium,” I will set two

of the minemes (*complexity* and *fury*) serving as its global exhibit aside, as they are quite abstract, concept-like elements. The remaining ones (*mire, vein* and *blood*) still show a higher level of concreteness than either *song* or *bird.* While it is dubious whether *mire, vein* and *blood* are basic objects or parts of one (perhaps of the objects *land, vessel* and *fluid*), but, in either case, neither of them contains a large number of subordinate objects as *bird* does. In other words, while *bird* only evokes an averaged example of many, more concrete objects, *mire, vein* and *blood* refer to less varied and therefore more concrete categories.

At the same time, however, the shift of the global exhibit from *bird / song* to the *fury / mire / vein / blood* complex also makes it part of the dual arrangement of minemes in the later poem. *Bird* and *song* in “Sailing to Byzantium” were elements which bridged the realms of ephemeral nature and eternal art. The *fury / mire / vein / blood* complex, by contrast, belongs undoubtedly to the natural side of this dichotomy. This is not to say that “Byzantium” lacks bridging elements; in fact, it contains more than its companion piece. *Bird* appears on both sides in the third stanza, and the bridging nature of *spirit* and *dolphin* has already been suggested. Also, while in “Sailing to Byzantium,” the bridging elements *bird* and *song* are closely related, *bird* stands apart from *dolphin* and *spirit* in “Byzantium,” even if the latter two are connected via the mythic interpretation. The larger number and separated nature of bridging elements, in turn, may slightly lessen the effect of the latter poem by obscuring the world model it depicts: transition form ephemeral to eternal is now possible not only via (Byzantine) art represented by the bird and singing (possibly signifying the very act of writing), but also via a more mythological route across *the* sea. Incidentally, while both the dome of Hagia Sophia and, more importantly, the *dolphin* are present in the early drafts of “Sailing to Byzantium,” Yeats abandoned them in the writing process.[47]

The extent of alienation in the two poems can be determined based on the presence and the situatedness of the lyrical I. I have suggested that in “Sailing to Byzantium,” references to the lyrical I on layer I are more frequent, and their placement also allowed situating the lyrical I as an “aged man,” which suggestion connects the lyrical I with a reconstruction of the biographical author at the time of the act of writing. Compared to this, the presence of the lyrical I in “Byzantium” is extremely limited, and it allows no further inference about its position than that of the addresser of the text. These observations show that alienation is more complete in “Byzantium” than in “Sailing to Byzantium.”

The extent of metathesis in the two poems shows, expectedly, approximately the same distribution. Representing an artist by a singing bird, as happens in “Sailing to Byzantium,” does not appear to be a metathesis wide enough to open up an unprecedentedly wide range of possible interpretations. The feeling that its central theme, the contrast between art and nature, is rendered into layers II and I in an unpretentious manner is enhanced by the direct, almost conceptual phrases in the poem itself. In “Byzantium,” the set-up is not inherently different, but more complicated in the respect that the ephemeral side of the “I” on layer III is represented by the more concrete image of the *complexities* of *fury, mire, veins* and *blood.* The (re-)introduction of *spirit* and *dolphin* to complement the bridging elements *song* and *bird*, while it can obscure the world-model of the poem, may well serve to provide an alternative to the representation of the transition of the artist as that of a singing bird, a somewhat conventional metaphor.

However, I do not see the main difference between the two Byzantium poems as one on the level of meaning, interpretation or referents. A basic dissimilarity that determines many of the textual structures reveals itself if one considers the distribution of minemes on layers A and B. The two similes in “Sailing to Byzantium” put all elements related to the city (the mosaic and the machinery) on layer B. In “Byzantium,” it is almost impossible to determine a straightforward descriptive relationship between images or minemes. Apart from the simile in

[47] Bradford, p. 115.

line 20, according to which the bird “can like the cocks of Hades crow,” the minemes are more coordinated than subordinated to each other as describers and describeds. This arrangement has the consequence that all images—starting from the dome, including the mummy, the bird, the flames and the dolphin—are placed on layer A, on the layer of the view. That is to say, while “Sailing to Byzantium” depicted the desired, eternal state on layer B, “Byzantium” does this on layer A.

If one interprets the latter poem against the previous one, the fact that this series of images has originally been a vision becomes apparent. “Sailing to Byzantium,” in other words, allows one to suppose that all elements in “Byzantium” originally resided on layer B, and have moved to layer A by the next “version” of the text. This is the movement characteristic of symbolism and of myths. Turning to the biographical author once more, one may note that a piece of writing whose textual organization is reminiscent of that of myths fits well in Yeats’s oeuvre. Moreover, this affinity of “Byzantium” to myths may also put in a new light the fact that it is in this text that more and more direct mythological allusions have been found.

The suggestion that “Byzantium,” in itself, contains only a covert indication that what it presents as view has been, in fact, vision, may explain why “Byzantium” appears to be a harder, more complex text to many readers. Read without the other Byzantium poem, it can fail to guide the reader to a reassuring interpretation, placing the images it conjures in relation to one another and in relation to the reader and the lyrical I. Presenting a vision that is already “there,” the text offers few entry points for the reader into the depicted realm.

The titles of the poems may also be related to this observation: in “Sailing to Byzantium,” Byzantium, the eternal state is a mere vision towards which the lyrical I strives.[48] The movement itself guarantees that the reader, identified with the lyrical I, is guided into the symbolic city. In “Byzantium,” the lyrical I is already in the city, as the vision is already there in the view.

Conclusion

The analyses of the two Byzantium poems of W. B. Yeats have shown how a common theme may be treated in essentially different ways. “Sailing to Byzantium” contrasts the view of the ephemeral, worthless world with the vision of eternal art and Byzantium; its structure is more linear with the temporal dimension rooted in the interpretation, not in the representation, as happens in “Byzantium.” In the latter poem, vision takes over, expelling view, and becomes the view itself; the lyrical I is more suppressed; linearity, apart from some vague hints at the passing of time, almost disappears.

At the same time, “Byzantium,” especially because of the disappearance of the view, is harder to interpret in itself. It is as if the poem relied on “Sailing to Byzantium” for a context against which it becomes intelligible.

All of the differences between the poems listed above and taken from different layers and levels point to the suggestion that “Byzantium” is an inherently symbolic text whereas “Sailing to Byzantium” approximates that mode of writing without being entirely controlled by it. This conclusion links and puts in a new light the various observations (regarding the presence of the lyrical I, the use of rhetorical figures, etc.) made about the two Yeatsian texts, and it also connects the arrival at symbolism with the arrival in the city of Byzantium, a place constructed entirely out of a vision that appeared in front of the traveller.

[48] The first—complete—version of “Sailing to Byzantium” was, significantly, titled “Towards Byzantium” (Bradford, p. 113). “Byzantium” does not appear to have had an alternative title.